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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT MORESBY 000188

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FOR EAP PDAS STEPHENS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR BP

SUBJECT: SOLOMONS GETS DICEY - TIME FOR A U.S. STATEMENT

REF: A) PORT MORESBY 185 B) 4/21 STANTON/EAP E-MAIL

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert Fitts, Ambassador, AMB, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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1.(C) SUMMARY: The barely-elected government in Solomon Islands has collapsed. Though constitutional norms have been held to, the worrisome outcome could be a government incorporating figures tempted to undercut RAMSI and thus the restoration of good governance. The population retains a great deal of respect for the U.S. We strongly recommend that a senior U.S. official make a statement encouraging Solomon Islanders to continue working with RAMSI to rebuild their institutions and ensure their future. END SUMMARY

15 MINUTES OF FAME

2.(U) On April 26, barely five days after being sworn in, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Rini resigned on the floor of Parliament. The day before, his government had barely squeaked through election of a Deputy Speaker with 25 votes out of 50. That was only made possible by the incarceration of two opposition supporters and the walk out of the remaining 23. The collapse was triggered when four members of his coalition, including three ministers, crossed to the opposition.

OUT WITH THE OLD

3.(SBU) Rini had served as DPM in the previous government and headed essentially the same coalition this time around. (The previous Prime Minister was the one who squeaked into the Deputy Speakers chair.) The coalition had been backed by local ethnic Chinese businessmen and dogged by charges of under-the-table funding from Taiwan. Their initial success (27-23) in the new Parliament had triggered two days of violence, destroying much of the local Chinatown and led to quick military reinforcement of RAMSI by Australian and New Zealand troops.

NEW CROWD A DICEY BUNCH

4.(C) The opposition, now 28 or so, is united only by opposition to the old crowd. However, it includes figures intimately involved in the ethnic violence that tore the Solomons apart and a fair share of corrupt souls. Still, Solomon Islands lacks cohesive parties and there are prominent figures, Parliamentary Speaker Keniloria for example, not completely identified with either side but who may figure in the mix to hash out the new government. Some fragments of the just dissolved coalition could figure in the new group as well. For example, the lead defector

(Industry Minister Sogavare) headed a party of six members. Rumor now has it that he may have been offered the PM's job to effect his switch.

DON'T LET RAMSI BE MISUNDERSTOOD

5.(SBU) The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands restored order in July, 2003, and has since been working to rebuild government institutions particularly the police. It is Australian-led and largely perceived as an Australian entity though there is a large New Zealand contingent with smaller contributions from Pacific Island neighbors.

6.(C) RAMSI - and we - were largely caught by surprise with the sudden outbreak of violence following a peaceful election which was to have been an important milestone on the road to RAMSI's success. Clearly, the ethnic tension has remained under the surface of RAMSI-enforced law and order. Local institutions are in no sense ready to cope with the forces that would tear the government apart.

7.(C) RAMSI and the Solomon Island police, which are perceived as under RAMSI control, acted throughout the past week to enforce the law and restore order. However, many - and not just in the now victorious opposition - argue that RAMSI actions bolstered the previous order. Resident Americans told us that RAMSI police were guarding assets owned by prominent Chinese financiers while allowing the crowds to run riot amongst poorer Chinese shop houses. Others, Speaker Keniloria, for example argue that inappropriate RAMSI action fed the violence. (NOTE: we understand, but do not buy either argument.)

8.(C) Therefore, opposition members will find some support for charges that RAMSI took sides. After all, the initial government success in naming the deputy speaker only became possible after RAMSI detained and refused bail to two opposition MPs. (NOTE: Both of whose actions we understand fully justified

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the step.)

DON'T GO OFF HALF-COCKED

9.(C) We therefore are concerned that the new government, when it emerges will contain many who are cocky with their success and have a real agenda of trimming RAMSI's authority. Thus could jeopardize three years of careful work to rebuild Solomon Islands into a nation with a viable government. We judge that the Commissioner of Police, an Australian not formally affiliated with RAMSI, might come under immediate pressure for police actions during the violence.

U.S.G. CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

10.(SBU) The Solomons population maintains an abiding respect for the U.S. dating back to our effort in Guadalcanal in World War II. Except for missionaries and a very popular Peace Corps program (suspended since the ethnic violence), we have been largely absent since. However, we are seen as impartial and less self-interested than other powers.

11.(SBU) RAMSI marks a major long-term commitment by Australia toward regional stability. Even before recent events, Prime Minister Howard spoke of a term of at least ten years.

12.(C) Embassy therefore proposes that a senior U.S. official make a statement designed to reinforce the population's support for RAMSI assistance and to urge them to keep their eye on the ball. The issue is to rebuild government institutions for long-term stability rather than the politics of the moment. To have an impact, the statement would have to be prominent enough to get into the local press. The general population has no access to the world press. A statement would be most effective if it became public before new nominations for Prime Minister, scheduled for May 1.

13.(C) SUGGESTED POINTS:

The U.S. is concerned by the civil disturbances which have shattered recent harmony and may bring about economic hardship

for Solomon Islands citizens.

However, we are happy to note that, despite deep political divisions, each step in the past week has been taken according to the constitution. We congratulate the Solomon Islands people and leaders for that.

We welcome the assistance to Solomon Islands authorities provided by her neighbors working through RAMSI.

We reaffirm our support for Solomon Islands to work with RAMSI to build sustainable peace so as to foster economic growth and good governance.

Nation building is never an easy process. It takes time and there will be setbacks. But we have a strong commitment to help countries in transition, such as Solomon Islands.

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